



## Press Conference: Potential of Turkmenistan

**Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs**

Remarks to Public Affairs Section of U.S. Embassy

Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

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**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, I'm Richard Boucher. I've seen some of you before on my last visit here, but I wanted to tell you a little bit about my visit in the last three days. This is my second visit to Turkmenistan and this visit comes at a moment of opportunity. I've had a chance to have a lot of discussions with the, with the new President, with the Foreign Minister, with the Education Minister, Speaker of the Parliament, Deputy Minister of Defense. And I also had the chance to go up to Turkmenabat, and uh, visit the Pedagogical Institute there and speak to some of the students and teachers, to visit the various people involved with community development, young people using the Internet, using the computers that we supply, I went to an American Corner, saw a lot of the young people there who are interested in the United States and learning English.

It's been a very exciting day. I'd say I leave here hopeful. My conversations, whether with the President or with the students were all about the future. The students were very excited that the President has actually extended the number of years of schooling, and we think steps like that are very important to the future of this country, and we welcome the commitment to change. I emphasized in all my meetings that we would like to cooperate with Turkmenistan.

We would like to help unlock the potential of the people of Turkmenistan, especially when it comes to building the foundations of a modern society with education, with access to information, with technology, with the rule of law. I agreed with the President that uh, we would follow up with a series of experts' delegations in all the areas of cooperation. Areas like economics, education, energy, security as well as political reform and human rights. I said we were hopeful, but we're also looking for signs. We're looking for steps that indicate that the new government has a desire for a real change and has a desire to better the life of its people. As we've said before, the government here has a desire to change, we're ready for a new beginning in our relationship. I hope that this is the new beginning, but I won't know until we start seeing what we can actually do together to benefit the people of Turkmenistan. So with that, I'd be glad to take your questions. Who wants to start? Yes.

**Question:** Reuters...

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Yes sir.

**Question:** You're talking about...you say you're hopeful, um, maybe you could just tell us what the sign...what hope, hopeful signs that you there see are so far, what less hopeful signs...not to give you a leading question, but perhaps it would be a more hopeful sign right now if you were talking to a much fuller room of, uh, correspondents who traveled here.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** It would, it definitely would. I think, um, as you look around here, as you examine any of the questions that have to be dealt with, you're always overwhelmed by the fact that there's a lot of things to do, there's a long way to go before they can be...I'd say assume their rightful place, assume a normal place in the community of nations. At the same time, we've heard a very consistent commitment towards becoming a more open nation, towards opening up to information, travel, expanding education, expanding exchanges -- that's been pretty consistently stated throughout the election periods and, and (inaudible) in the speech by the President yesterday and I have to say, in the meetings when I met with him. Um, let me...let me finish. The, uh, today they issued a decree that education would be expanded again, I'm told there are an Internet café or two that might've opened up today. So, uh, let's hope that's a good indicator of the direction and well see more things, but there are a lot of things that need to be done.

**Question:** Did you discuss freedom of speech, freedom of press during your meetings?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** I discussed uh, all the democracy and human rights issues. Uh, there... there are steps the government can take quickly and there are systems and structures that need to be built over time. So things like allowing people to travel, allowing free access to information are first steps that can be done relatively simply. Building an elections system and a system of stable democratic institutions can take longer. So the point I made is it is good to approach these things in a very systematic way. I welcome the government's contact with the OSCE. I said the United States was willing to help move along this path towards a more open but also more democratic and stable and system. And made clear it was important to all of us to see that movement, uh, and important to understand that it was leading down a steady path. Sir.

**Question:** Reuters Agency, did you discuss the issue of abolishing the blacklist for those who cannot leave the country? And the second question is did you discuss the issue of the Red Cross access to prisoners?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Um, on the first one, not in those words, but we did talk about the importance of the freedom of travel. And yes, I did raise the issue of allowing the Red Cross to visit the prisons. That's something that's standard around the world, and we hope that Turkmenistan would allow that as well.

**Question:** Did you get a response to the Red Cross question?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Um, I don't think it's for me to speak for the government of Turkmenistan, so let me just say that I raised it and, uh, what's important is to see what happens and that's what we're watching. Sir.

**Question:** Two questions, the first one, the new President, did...did he open the door for democracy or is it just opening of a small window for democracy, what do you think? The second question is, uh, the current new president served in the former government for six to seven years and um, did he tell you during the meeting that um, he did not support the old policies under President Niyazov?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** On the uh, on the first question, whether it was a window or a door, I don't know. Um, I don't know how big a window is or how small a door is. It's...it's a really a question of what do they do, and do they start a steady movement, a systematic movement in a more open direction. You know I'd say...in the States we have an expression, you have to talk the talk and you have to walk the walk.

You have to say things, but you also have to do things.

So we've sort of talked this much and we've walked that much, eh, uh, I forget what was the second half of your question.

Oh -- acknowledging the policies of the past. We really talked about the future. Um, we've had talked a little bit about some of the areas where we've had good cooperation in the past we've worked together on border security, we've worked together against narcotics we've worked together on health, education a bit.

Others have been very difficult. Not just for us but for the people of Turkmenistan. So it's really about them. It's not so much what we do with the government, it's what we and the government do for the people of the country. So that's where we were focused: what was his program for the future of the people and what could we do to contribute to the future of the people of the country.

**Question:** Could you elaborate on the agreement [inaudible -- about continuation of agreement on border security and particularly on combating drug trafficking].

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** I think, um, we have ongoing programs in those areas and I think we're always looking for ways we can expand the cooperation. I visited this morning with two members of the Nevada National Guard, from our state of Nevada. And they've been working for some time on two border crossing points-- one to Iran and one to Afghanistan to help Turkmenistan improve its border control. And that's primarily an anti-narcotics program. So we'll bring an expert to Lebap and talk about security issues and we'll look for other areas like that where we might be able to expand our cooperation.

We also talked quite a bit about the fight against terrorism and Afghanistan. Um, we uh, well, the uh, the government here is obviously concerned about instability in Afghanistan. Uh, we talked about steps the United States is taking including new funding, new troops to try to help uh defeat the enemy in Afghanistan and help the government build a more stable nation, and extend itself throughout the nation. Turkmenistan is helping in its own way by allowing humanitarian overflights by supplying electricity to Afghanistan, to the north, by welcoming Afghan students here at the Pedagogical Institute I met - I went to today, hosts thirty students a year from Afghanistan. We talked about ways in which Turkmenistan and Afghanistan could expand their cooperation further.

Okay -- somebody else first time? No? Yes.

**Question:** You mentioned that with the president you agreed to send a team of experts on political reforms and human rights -- when will that take place and what will be the purpose of that trip?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Uh, don't know yet when it will take place, we'll have to set up the schedule of all these visits. And, uh, the purpose is to discuss how we might cooperate in these areas, to understand the government's plans, and how we or the OSCE or others might be able to help.

**Question:** Was there the issue of resumption of Transcaspiian gas pipeline raised and how did the government react -- were they interested or were they not interested?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** It sort of came up in passing. The discussion about energy really focused on two aspects. And I would have to say it was not a major topic and we didn't go into a lot of detail. But the two aspects were one, the need for multiple outlets, multiple opportunities, meaning the ability to take advantage of different opportunities so that Turkmenistan could get a world price, a fair price for its energy. And that then implies that if there are multiple outlets, multiple choices, that strengthens the independence and sovereignty of the nation. The second aspect was the revenue that's produced by oil and gas. And how important it is to use that revenue for the benefit of the people, to support stronger education systems or better public facilities.

But as I said, this time I think energy was a minor topic -- important enough for me to list, but not the major topic of my visit and uh, discussed in a general way.

**Question:** How do you respond to criticisms from groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and perhaps not surprisingly the International Crisis Group, saying that perhaps we shouldn't really be engaging with the new authorities in Turkmenistan until they've actually taken the steps you're saying that you're waiting to see whether they take.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** I kind of scratch my head and say "Why?"

I don't think you achieve very much with people by standing ten thousand miles away and making demands. When there's a possibility of change, when there's something happening, we ought to be here. When people say they want to make changes in the right direction, we oughta come out, and try to work with them and help them achieve that. If they don't do anything, if they stop, if they reverse course, then we can go back ten thousand miles away and make demands. But if the government and a people want to open up, want to move in a healthy direction of a modern society, the United States wants to be part of that and wants to work with that.

Do you have another one?

**Question:** On the gas topic, which of the gas pipeline projects that Turkmenistan is considering at this point does the U.S. Government consider a priority on?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** All of them. Um, our view of energy exports is that, uh, people selling energy ought to have the opportunity to sell it in any direction that they find commercially and economically viable. So if Turkmenistan has multiple pipelines, multiple opportunities, it'll be better for the independence of this nation, for the wealth of this nation, for the people of the nation. So whichever of those options -- North, South, East or West -- prove to be commercially, economically viable, those are the ones that should go forward.

**Question:** Will you be able to help in the future with opening the RFERL office in Turkmenistan. It's existent in all the countries now, except Turkmenistan.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Well I think you're right. RFERL is present throughout the region, I think it's listened to in the region. Um, we certainly think the people in this region deserve access to information and as I mentioned, we support normal access for all journalists or any service in the countries of the region.

**Question:** Um, I heard one story but did not see it myself that in Mary province of Turkmenistan, in the district named Yoloten, they discovered a large gas reserve and they said to open it up, when they opened that up thirty people working there perished, they went under the ground and the oil is bursting up -- the gas is bursting up -- and its they can't close that well down now. So the climate has started changing there and the people in the region, populated region, they complain that it affects their ecology in that region. Are you aware of that, do you know anything about the possibility of closing it?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Um, no. I think, there are a lot of stories that circulate around. I've heard some bits of stories like this. But I think you're making a good argument for freedom of the press. People are able to report accurately on these things and uh the people have the right information and know what they need to do or not -- don't need to do about it. But what's going on down there I can't say for sure.

Okay?

**Question:** The reason I asked that person is, first, any person needs his air, and people have a hard time breathing clean air in that region.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Yeah. I don't know what the facts are, though. And I hope that, as a reporter, you get the story and manage to tell us all about it. Can we make this the last question? Thanks

**Question:** I have just been to the Internet café and saw the site of RFERL.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** There you go. We're halfway here already.

**Question:** But the question is, did you ask about the possibility for stops at Mary airport for military flights?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:** Um, we talked about humanitarian overflights but really there's nothing more to say about it at this moment. There's nothing more to say at this moment about humanitarian overflights um we're not planning any sort of basing here um we're not - um, but we've cooperated in the past, in terms of humanitarian overflights, and we want to continue to do that.

Okay. Thank you very much. It's good to see you. See you next time.

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